

# Presenting the classical world in museums

Rhianned Smith

**M**useums can tell us about the present as well as the past. Here Rhianned Smith, who teaches Museum Studies at the University of Reading, explores the history of Classical collection and display in the UK.

What is Museum Studies and what can it bring to the study of Classics? You might assume that museums deal in cold hard facts. However, what we collect and how we display it says a lot about our own assumptions. Museum displays are not as straightforward as we might think; they can present quite a specific view of life in the past, and can be analysed in the same way that we would critique a film, book, or play. Think about a recent visit you have made to a Classical museum. Where did the curator focus your attention? What did he or she decide to emphasize, and what was left out? What priorities and choices can you detect in the display?

Museum collections of antiquities also reveal interesting stories about the last 250 years of European history, as we can see in Susanne Turner's article on page 15. By looking more closely at museums of Classical objects we can learn about recent history as well as about the ancient past, and challenge what we think we understand about both.

## History of Classical collecting and display

People have always collected objects, but the idea of amassing a private or public collection really took hold during the 1700s. Enlightenment scholars argued that learning from direct observation was best, and objects were a good way of studying the world from your drawing room. At that time it also became common for young men with money to go on a 'Grand Tour' around Europe after leaving college, to see Classical sites. These travellers often brought back objects to display in their homes and gardens.

As collections got larger, and public interest in collections of art and historical or ethnographic objects grew, private collections started to be bought or donated as the founding core of museums, for a variety of motives – philanthropy, educational intent, the desire to keep large collections intact, and the potential for

finding and acquiring impressive works. Elias Ashmole's huge and varied collection was donated to Oxford University and opened as the Ashmolean Museum in 1677, while the British Museum in London was founded by Act of Parliament in 1753 on the basis of Sir Hans Sloane's collection of antiquities, books, natural history specimens, and prints.

We do not always share the judgments or practices of these earlier collectors. For example, much 'Greek' sculpture collected in Britain until the 19th century was really Roman, copies or versions of Greek statues that Roman collectors had themselves singled out for reproduction. The genuinely Greek sculpture from the Parthenon in Athens and temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae, displayed in London at the British Museum, were therefore important points in the story of appreciation of Classical Greek sculpture in the UK and in the history of museum display.

Moreover, such collections were often viewed primarily as art works, and were displayed in a way that showed off their aesthetic properties. By putting objects against a simple background with lots of space around them, often in long gallery spaces, curators encouraged people to focus their vision on the object. People of culture could stroll around these galleries to see and be seen.

As museum displays developed, objects could be arranged by date to tell a grand developmental 'story of art', or ordered by who collected them, by style, by place found, or by theme ('youth', say, or groups of gods and goddesses). Each arrangement tells a slightly different story about the objects. In the 1850s there was also a big debate about splitting the British Museum into art and archaeology collections. However, this was easier said than done. People were happy thinking of Greek sculptures as 'art' but they weren't too sure whether Egyptian artefacts should be put in the same building as paintings: debates like this show how

people thought of, and 'ranked', ancient civilizations and the artefacts they left behind in ways alien to modern museum curatorship.

## Collections, empire, and war

Museum collections were also used to make wider points about notions such as aesthetics, citizenship, or empire, equally anchored in contemporary events and attitudes. During the Napoleonic Wars in particular, large quantities of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian antiquities were moved around Europe by rival powers who saw themselves as the heirs to Classical empires. The Rosetta Stone, a trilingual inscription vital to the decoding of Egyptian hieroglyphics, is a wonderful example. It was discovered by French explorers and seen by Napoleon. When the war in Egypt turned against him it was then captured in Alexandria by the British, under somewhat murky circumstances (not before the French discoverers threatened to destroy it and all their other finds rather than hand them over). Whisked away to Britain it was presented to King George III and eventually ended up in the British Museum in 1802, with new inscriptions painted on it to commemorate its British capture – as if Britain and France were vying to associate themselves not just with the glory of its discovery and then decipherment, but with the Ptolemaic (and Roman) empires in captured Egypt.

As public taste and scholarly practice developed through the 19th and 20th centuries, Egypt continued to fascinate. Towards the end of the 19th century museum curators started to run their own excavations or sponsor archaeologists to bring back objects. Wondrous and beautiful objects were most likely to be bought and displayed: one of the most famous examples was Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, with exhibitions of this material in museums around the world always attracting huge crowds. Blockbuster finds could subsidize continued excavation. A good example of this is the Petrie Museum at University College London. The Egyptologist Flinders Petrie sold star items to larger museums to pay for his excavations, but

kept smaller domestic items in his own collection. A walk around the Petrie, with its huge typological series of objects like tools, weights and measures, jewellery, and amulets, gives you a different view of life in Ancient Egypt and the Sudan.

The circumstances and history of such collections shape the holdings and displays of museums today, from the Petrie to the Parthenon Marbles in London and the coins and pottery in numerous local museums up and down the UK. If we analyse modern exhibitions we can still see the fingerprints of these individuals, events, and ideas: modern museum collections reflect the tastes of these earlier collectors and curators, and the state of their understanding.

Over the last 20 years, though, museum professionals have tried to ask new questions of their collections through collaboration with new audiences. Classical antiquities can provoke deeper questions about issues such as ethnicity, war, slavery, citizenship, and gender. How can we move from appreciating the look of an object to asking these big questions of ourselves?

### **Museums in the modern age**

The older practice of displaying Greek sculpture purely as art, for example, is now seen as rather old fashioned: assuming that the objects on display are so beautiful that they can simply 'speak for themselves' asks a lot of visitors, who may be encountering such artefacts for the first time without knowing much, if anything, about them. At the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology in Reading we used subtle reconstruction such as arranging pots on shelves by shape as though they were in a store room. Curators may also display objects to highlight obvious restoration work which raises issues of conservation science. Some people engage best with 'stories' so curators and museum learning officers may discuss myths or other narratives associated with the objects on display. Labels or even digital apps can be used to add rich content, discussing the people who owned or used the objects. Greek museum objects had domestic and religious functions in their original context and we can enjoy them from a number of different angles... with a little help.

A lot of Roman sculpture was brought over from the continent in the 19th century but in the 'story of art' narrative it came to be presented as inferior to and derivative from, Greek sculpture. On the other hand, museum interpretation of 'the Romans' is different from representations of Greeks or Egyptians, not least because we have Roman sites and objects scattered throughout most of the British Isles. We have original spaces and objects that were owned by individual, ordinary, named

people, who seem closer to visitors through this connection to the UK. If you go into a Roman exhibition or site you are therefore much more likely to see elements of 'reconstruction'. This could be mocked-up rooms and buildings or even characters from the past brought to life by actors or digital technology.

The Museum of London's Roman galleries have such room sets but they have recently added to these through their 'youth council'. Students from local schools appear on video sets and talk about their own connection to the objects. A project linking the University of Reading Archaeology department and the Runnymede Trust has done something similar by looking at where people in Roman Britain came from. They have run sessions at the Museum of London talking about ethnic diversity in Roman times. In this way we see curators are exploiting the story-telling potential of these everyday objects from familiar places, and encouraging visitors from different backgrounds to make connections with contemporary issues in modern Britain.

In conclusion, museum collections and displays say as much about us as they do about the ancients. By looking at how people have collected and presented classical antiquities we learn about the history of European culture and history. We can also trace and question our own assumptions about the Classical World. Finally, by connecting Classical collections to current issues we can engage new audiences with these objects and ask challenging questions of ourselves. Something to think about next time you visit a museum!

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